

## Brother Solomon Burke

By Peter Stone Brown

The Rolling Stones introduced me to Solomon Burke when they covered his classic, "Everybody Needs Somebody To Love," on their third album, released in the U.S. as *Rolling Stones Now* in 1964. By that time Solomon Burke's influence on other musicians was for some mysterious reason much bigger than his own success, which was more on the R&B charts than the pop charts. A few years later when I finally bought *The Best of Solomon Burke*, my mind was blown at what an astoundingly great singer he was. On ballads he could be smooth as velvet, starting out laidback, then build to an incredibly funky shout that came right from the church, which of course made total sense since he was a boy preacher.

Before Ray Charles, Burke mixed soul and country on his first record, "Just Out of Reach of My Two Empty Arms," and he never stopped doing that either.

In February of 1980, Burke returned to his hometown of Philadelphia to play what was basically an oldies show at the Locust Theater. Also on that bill were Hank Ballard and Martha Reeves. I had a radio show at the time and was all set to interview all three, but Burke was late getting to the theater. My contact kept telling me, "The Bishop will be here any minute," but Burke didn't show up until a couple of minutes before he was to take the stage. I retreated from backstage to the theater to watch the set, but don't remember all that much about it.

About a dozen years later, Burke returned to Philly to play a concert at Penn's Landing on the Delaware River waterfront. Unlike the show at the Locust, this time he brought his own band. Burke was one of the legendary characters in the music and entertainment business. Along with being a preacher and running his own church, he ran a funeral parlor business, pharmacies, had 21 children and 90 grandchildren, and 21 great-grandchildren.

Burke was a huge man, weighing several hundred pounds. I can't remember whether at Penn's Landing whether he used the throne he would eventually use at his shows, but he did sit down to sing. It didn't make any difference, his presence was overwhelming. It was a hot summer day and Burke and his band were impeccably dressed. On either side of him were two men also in suits with bowties, whose sole purpose was to continually produce new handkerchiefs to wipe his brow throughout the show as he sang. It was one of those great

moments of bordering on a crazy rock and roll showmanship. All of Burke's vocal powers were still intact and the show was everything you hoped it would be with beyond stellar renditions of his biggest hits.

While Burke recorded throughout his life, in 2002, he received a well deserved renaissance with the release of *Don't Give Up On Me*. Not long after, I saw him for the last time opening for Van Morrison at the Madison Square Garden Theater, whom he joined onstage for a duet on Morrison's song, "Fast Train." Unfortunately most of the people around where I was sitting were more interested in talking on cell phones or about the previous night's hockey game than they were in the R&B legend on the stage.

Solomon Burke may not have been the first soul singer, but was certainly of the pioneers and it is safe to say that such musicians as Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, the Rolling Stones and many others would not have been who they were without him.

When I finally, somewhat reluctantly joined Facebook a couple of years ago, I was amazed you could become "friends" with Solomon Burke. He posted frequently alternating concert and tour announcements with messages of peace and love. One of his last posts less than two weeks ago was to wish Jerry Lee Lewis a happy birthday. When someone responded, "Jerry Lee Lewis, are you kidding?", Burke responded with something along the lines of: I've known Jerry Lee Lewis for years and he is a gentleman. From all reports one could say the same about Solomon Burke. There's not going to anyone else like him again.